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# Senate Voting On the Strategic Defense Initiative: The Impact of the 1991 Gulf War

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the effects of the success of the Patriot missile system in the 1991 Gulf War on Senate roll call votes for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Previous studies have shown that both Party Identification (PID) and Ideology have had a significant effect on senators' votes on defense weapons systems. Using Logit regression techniques, this paper examines whether PID and Ideology, both of which are central to political identity, remained significant factors in three Senate votes on SDI; this paper is unique compare to previous studies of such matters in that it adds two additional explanatory variables to existing models: (1) the extent to which each state might benefit from SDI and (2) whether or not the senator from each state was up for re-election in 1992. It is hypothesized that the findings will suggest that external factors played a role in the SDI Senate votes in question. Specifically, it is hypothesized that the effects of the Gulf War Patriot missile successes led to greater legislative support (compared to support levels from previous years) for the Strategic Defense Initiative among Democrats, those senators whose states would benefit from SDI funding, and those senators seeking re-election.

## Background

Conventional wisdom argues that a congressman's vote on defense issues can be predicted based on both his political ideology (which is presumed to directly shape personal opinion) and the potential benefit to his state. Most research, however, has tended to confirm the influence of only the former while disproving the significance of the latter (McCormick, 1985; McCormick & Black, 1983; Ray, 1981; Russett, 1970; Wayman, 1985). Findings have been similar in studies focused on predictions of how congressional members would vote on specific weapons systems. Again, the effects of ideology were found to have significant influence on such votes, whereas the potential benefits to a congressman's state were found to have no significant influence on his vote on such matters (Bernstein & Anthony, 1974; Fleisher, 1985).

The consistency of the finding of no significance between state benefit and voting outcomes with respect to weapons systems is surprising. Members of Congress are often suggested to behave parochially; that is, they are believed to have a strong incentive to garner benefits for their constituents out of a sense of self-interest (Fiorina, 1974; Mayhew 1974). While this does not appear to be the case with respect to support for weapons systems in particular, some studies have suggested that there are parochial effects on defense programs such as military bases (Arnold, 1979; Twight, 1989, 1990) and some operations and maintenance programs (Carter 1989; Higgs, 1988).

Much of the research on weapons systems has focused on anti-Ballistic missile systems (ABM) in general and the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) specifically. James Lindsay (1990 and 1991) has tested the factors that influence voting on issues relating to SDI in both the House and the Senate and has consistently found strong support for ideology as a predictor of Senate votes and no significant support for the effects of parochialism. While Lindsay appears to have put the final nail in the coffin against the parochialism hypothesis on weapons systems voting, his studies may not be conclusive on such matters for two reasons: First, both of his studies reflect congressional voting during the Cold War. Additionally, his studies have not considered the possible effects of international events swaying votes in one direction or another.

This study is, therefore, intended to follow up on the work of Lindsay and others on the study of weapons systems voting by examining roll call voting on SDI in the Senate in 1991. The choice of this particular year is intentional. The Gulf War was fought and won in January and February of 1991, and the American public and Congress witnessed the great success of American soldiers not only on the battlefield but also in the skies above it. Specifically, a modified surface-to-air missile (SAM) known as the Patriot helped to shield U.S. troops and Israeli civilians from incoming Scud missiles. The perceived success of the Patriot in its service as an ABM device led to a new ground-swell of support in favor of developing a real ABM system for the defense of the United States. This support centered around the Bush administrations' Global Protection against Limited Strikes (GPALS) program. GPALS was a scaled-down version of President Reagan's original SDI vision.

As a result of this new bipartisan support for such a program, Congress passed the Missile Defense Act in 1991. This act called upon the Defense Department to develop the necessary missiles, radars, and sensors on satellites for an ABM system that would be compliant with the 1972 ABM Treaty. The National Missile Defense Act further ordered that the system be ready "by the earliest date allowed by the availability of appropriate technology or by fiscal year 1996."<sup>1</sup> Congress also endorsed a "robust" program for follow-up technologies, including Brilliant Pebbles, a non-nuclear system of interceptors that was designed to operate without

external guidance. Finally, the act also called for talks with the Soviet Union on amending the ABM Treaty.

Despite bipartisan support, the Bush administration seemed unsure of how it should react to the passing of the MDA. First it delayed the initial deployment date by a year. Then it told Congress it did not want the first ground-based interceptor site at Grand Forks, and proceeded to squander half a year renegotiating.<sup>2</sup> This was a costly mistake by the administration. By the time authorization and appropriations got underway, support for the MDA had decayed considerably. A number of senators who had supported the MDA in 1991 turned their backs on it in 1992. The opportunity the Gulf War had provided was lost as a result of the Bush administration's poor handling of the momentum the war had granted them on the ABM system front.

The question remains, then, why did such hearty support in 1991 wane by 1992? This paper proposes that in 1991, senators were responding to the support of the public for missile defenses, spurred by the Gulf War. This hypothesis is based on the results of a poll conducted by the Worthern group in January of 1991, which found that when the American public was asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: "Spending billions of dollars for sophisticated weapons in the 1980s was worth the cost because with those weapons we [saved] the lives of thousands of American troops in the war against Iraq," 85% agreed, and only 14% disagreed. In this paper, the hypothesis that the external Gulf War events influenced senators' voting on SDI is tested by examining three Senate votes on SDI. In addition, added to the three variables previously used by Lindsay (ideology, parochialism, and PID), this paper will consider the additional variable of the prospect of re-election for each senator. This re-election variable is used in an attempt to capture the effects of the Gulf War by suggesting that senators up for re-election were more likely to support SDI funding because it was politically popular to do so after the Gulf War.

### **Data and Methods**

Three Senate votes (Votes 171, 172, and 173) on SDI serve as the dependent variables in this study. Senate vote 171 was a motion to kill a proposed amendment to cut \$1.4 billion from the \$4.6 billion authorized for SDI and to prohibit any funding for the space-based interceptors program. Senate vote 172 was a motion to kill an amendment to prohibit the deployment of the ground-based ABM system at Grand Forks, ND. Senate vote 173 was an amendment to cut \$1 billion in funding authorized for SDI. The pro-SDI position won in all three instances.

*Table One: Description of the Dependent and Independent Variables*

Variable	Description
Senate Vote 171	Vote to kill the Harkin amendment which would cut \$1.4 billion of the \$4.6 billion authorized for SDI and prohibits funding for the space-based interceptors program. Motion passed: 60-38. A "yea" vote was a vote supporting the president's position. 08-01-91.
Senate Vote 172	Vote to kill Harkin amendment to prohibit the deployment of the ground-based anti-ballistic missile system at Grand Forks, ND. Motion agreed to: 64-34. A "yea" vote was a vote supporting the president's position. 08-01-91.
Senate Vote 173	Bumpers Amendment to cut \$1 billion of the \$4.6 billion authorized for the Strategic Defense Initiative and transfer savings to reducing the deficit. Rejected: 46-52. A "nay" vote was a vote supporting the President's position. 08-01-91.
PID	1 = Republican; 0 = Democrat.
Ideology	Scaled NSI score (0-100)
Benefit	State Financial Benefit from SDI. 1 = Monetary Benefit; 0 = No Monetary Benefit.
Election	Whether Senator was up for Re-Election in 1992. 1 = Up for Re-Election 0 = Not Up for Re-Election.

Four variables are used in an attempt to gauge why senators supported these measures in 1991. The first of these is a dichotomous variable measuring party identification. Democrats are coded "0," and Republicans are coded "1." It is theorized that those senators of the president's party (Republican) will be more likely to support the pro-SDI position than will Democrats. SDI and defense-related issues in general are considered by most Americans to fall under the auspices of the Republican Party. Second, a variable measuring each senator's individual ideology is used. The senators' ideologies are quantified using the 1990 National Security Index (NSI) scores for senators. The NSI prepared by the American Security Council (ASC), rates members on their support of defense and foreign policy issues. Scores range from 0 (dovish) to 100 (hawkish). It is believed that as the scale number rises, so too does an individual's support for SDI. Third, a variable measuring partisan benefit is included. This serves to re-test the parochialism hypothesis. The state benefit variable is scored as "1" for those states expected to receive some form of financial benefit (or "pork") from SDI and "0" for those not expected to receive SDI such "pork." It is expected that senators whose states will receive financial benefit from SDI funding will be more likely to support SDI. Finally, a variable measuring whether a senator is up for re-election is added. It is a simple dichotomous variable scored "0" for those senators not up for re-election and "1" for those who are up for re-election. It is expected that senators due to face the voters in 1992 were more likely to support SDI. These four independent variables were then regressed against the three individual roll call votes on SDI. Logistic regression was used because the dependent variables were dichotomous.

### Findings

Table two presents the findings of all three votes. The first vote (Vote 171) shows both the re-election and the ideology variables to be significant. The PID and state benefit (parochialism) variables are found to be insignificant. This is as expected.

*Table Two: Logit Regression of 1991 Senate SDI Votes*

Vote Number:	171	172	173
Constant	-2.6245 (.6831)	-1.7765 (.5670)	-2.6156 (.6537)
PID	.9081 (.9322)	-.2363 (.9610)	0.8638 (.7551)
Ideology	.0514*** (.0116)	.0518*** (.0125)	.0435*** (.0101)
Benefit	-.1842 (.7315)	-.8179 (.6851)	-.3031 (.6588)
Election	1.1414*	1.1531*	.6858

	(.0716)	(.0684)	(.6347)
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.3986	.5060	.4687
-2 log likelihood	61.642	67.996	74.044
Goodness of Fit	64.960	100.376	86.445
N:	98	98	98

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Note: Standard Errors are in parentheses

\*p < .10, one-tailed test

\*\*p < .05, one-tailed test

\*\*\*p < .01, one-tailed test

Vote 171 calls for a motion to kill proposed cuts in SDI spending and prohibits funding for space-based interceptors. If there is a Gulf War effect, then senators' responses to Vote 171 should be to support SDI. While ideology remains the strongest predictor of Senate voting on weapons issues, the significance of the election variable suggests that there was indeed such an effect: senators up for re-election were doing what they considered to be politically popular by voting in support of full funding for SDI, which was popular among their constituents at that time, following the success of the Gulf War. In the second vote (Vote 172), logistic regression likewise indicates that along with ideology, the re-election variable is shown to have exercised an influence on senators' votes. The logic following the previous vote applies here as well: senators were simply moving with the majority in order to gain favor with their constituents preceding re-election. The results of the final logistic regression on Vote 173 are slightly different from the first two. Notably, the re-election variable drops out of significance. Ideology, however, maintains its significant status. The likely reason the election variable drops from significance with this vote is because it is worded to promote cutting SDI funding as a means to reduce the federal deficit. Few things are more popular with the public than cutting the deficit, and ABM defenses are certainly not among them.

These findings suggest that while ideology is still the strongest predictor of Senate voting on weapons issues, there are potential effects related to the Gulf War and the seeking of constituent support in the face of re-election that directly influenced senators' votes. In short, the prospect of facing the voters spurred a large number of senators to adopt a pro-SDI stance. It can be assumed that this was a result of the success of the Patriot missiles in the 1991 Gulf War. Additionally, these findings bolster support for the idea that international events can have a strong effect on legislators' votes. These external effects have long been neglected in the literature. This study has shown, however, that such effects are most likely present, manifesting themselves in Senate voting.

A second notable result of this study has been to show that there was general bipartisan support for the SDI program, and as such, PID alone was not a sufficient predictor in determining how a senator would vote in any of the three cases examined. This is surprising, considering the fact that SDI is generally considered to be a Republican-favored program and because other studies have shown PID to have had a significant effect on legislative voting on

weapons systems (Lindsay, 1990). The relative unreliability of PID to predict voting outcomes in the case of these three votes seems to indicate that the external events in 1991 (i.e. the Gulf War) curbed Democratic distaste for the program. Indeed, the lack of such partisan voting suggests that mutual support for the program arose out of the successes of the Patriot missile system.

Finally, the results of the analysis of the three votes conducted in this study reveal no significant state benefit (parochial) motivation behind voting outcomes. The continued insignificance of parochialism provides even more proof that parochialism itself is simply not a significant factor when senators make decisions on weapons systems. (Still, why parochialism or the pursuit of state benefits by individual senators did not increase following the Gulf War remains unclear. It would seem that the growth in bipartisan support the Patriot missile fostered for SDI would have lead senators to have taken the opportunity to vote on behalf of their constituents, but such voting apparently did not occur at a significant level.)

### **Impact**

Did this burst of support for a limited ballistic missile defense system in fact produce such a system? It did not. The George H.W. Bush administration, likely distracted by the recession and then 1992 election, did not capitalize on the bipartisan congressional support for such a system. Bush's defeat by Bill Clinton effectively ended the development efforts for a ballistic missile defense shield for the next eight years. George W. Bush, however, seemingly intent on finishing much of the old business his father had started, renewed US efforts to produce a defense shield. The second Bush administration withdrew the United States from the 1972 ABM Treaty in June 2002, and in December 2002, President George W. Bush signed National Security Presidential Directive 23, which outlined a plan to deploy a national missile defense system beginning in 2004. Most of the effort to deploy a functional system, however, was focused on placing systems in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Romania. President Obama subsequently scrapped plans to place ballistic missile defense systems in Eastern Europe in favor of locating the interceptors on US Navy vessels.

The march toward a viable national missile defense system for the United States has been slow. While some degree of ballistic missile threat has existed for the US homeland since 1950, the will to construct a defensive system to protect the country has been weak. This tepidness largely results from the high cost of deploying an effective system and the underlying attitude that the US homeland is not threatened. This latter attitude likely will change as nuclear proliferation continues and as the range of ballistic missiles in the hands of rogue states grows to threaten US territory. Aversions to cost might be overcome if members of Congress believe such an investment would produce an effective system.

What this means for contemporary politics is that the ongoing threat of nuclear proliferation might translate into congressional support for a ballistic missile defense program if the potential effectiveness of such a system is demonstrated during a conflict situation. The looming conflict with Iran could provide such a scenario. If Israel attempts to destroy or degrade Iran's ability to build nuclear weapons, Iran may respond with ballistic missile attacks against Israel. Israel has a variety of anti-ballistic missile systems in place (Arrow, Iron Dome, David's Sling), built with US assistance, and, if effective, these systems could renew calls in the US Congress for a deployment of similar systems here.



## Conclusions

Did the Gulf War affect senators' voting on the SDI? This study argues that it did, employing logistic regression to test whether four variables influenced senators' votes on three SDI-related votes. The findings suggest that while ideology is still the strongest predictor of legislative voting on weapons systems, the presence of an upcoming Senate election was also a significant factor in determining Senate votes on two occasions. Senators appear to have been responding to their constituents' desire for continued support of ABM programs. This, coupled with the finding that PID was an insignificant factor in determining Senate voting, suggests that the Gulf War success of the Patriot missile created real bipartisan support for the SDI program. As was mentioned earlier, however, this support was short in duration. The minds of the American public quickly turned from ABM defenses to fixing the economy. The Gulf War was forgotten, and bipartisan support for the SDI program was lost.

Thus, it is accurate to argue that President Bush lost a real opportunity to push through a deployment scheme for an actual BMD system. The Bush administration, by dragging its feet, allowed congressional support for the program to wane as the memories of the success of the Patriot missile fled into the past. This study has shown that (1) the Senate would have supported a deployment effort of an SDI in 1991 because of external influences, and (2) the overwhelming support of President Bush and the U.S. military following the Gulf War led senators to adopt a more bipartisan perspective regarding SDI.

Further study of the effects of external influences on Senate voting is needed. The effects suggested by this study may actually be indirect with respect to their effects on Senate voting because Senators were probably responding not only to the external influence of the Gulf War but also to the support of their constituents for the SDI program. As such, some combination of X and Y were likely at play (resulting bipartisan voting) a relationship that would merit further study. What remains without question is that the Gulf War led to increased public support for ballistic missile defense, as illustrated by bipartisan senator support for SDI programs in three Senate votes in 1991.

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<sup>1</sup>. Asker, James R. "Space-Based Systems Still Key to SDI, Capitol Hill Aides Say." *Aviation Week and Space Technology*. March 23, 1992, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>. Crouch, J.D. 1993. "National Missile Defense?" *Comparative Strategy*. 12: 58-64.

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